



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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April 29, 2013

Mr. Thomas Donilon
National Security Advisor
National Security Council
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Donilon:

The recent kidnapping of the Syriac Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Archbishops of Aleppo, Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim and Metropolitan Paul Yazigi, and the murder of their driver symbolize the alarming escalation of violence in Syria and the risks of expanding sectarian conflict. These two archbishops had ventured from Aleppo on a humanitarian mission to aid Syrians fleeing for safety near the border. As of this writing, their fate is unknown. The kidnapping of these two senior clerics exemplifies the increasing instability and lawlessness in Syria that is causing suffering for Muslims and Christians alike. The fighting between government and rebel forces has allowed factions and criminal elements to flourish as the rule of law wanes.

Pope Francis has prayed for peace “for dear Syria, for its people torn by conflict and for the many refugees who await help and comfort. How much blood has been shed! And how much suffering must there still be before a political solution to the crisis will be found?” We echo the Holy Father’s poignant question: How much more suffering must Syrians endure before a political solution is found?

A group of Syriac Christian leaders committed to remaining in Syria, a land entwined with the birth and growth of Christianity, reported that they look with dismay at what has happened to the Christian community in Iraq and want to ensure that the same fate does not befall Christians in Syria. For them it is not about taking sides in the civil war, but it is about building an inclusive, democratic Syria in which the citizenship rights of all Syrians, including Christians and other minorities, are respected. They urged our nation to engage with indigenous Christians and their leaders in Syria and to promote the protection of minorities, especially Christians. They want the United States to build strong ties with well-established communities in Syria that are best able to share the challenges facing Christians and other members of civil society who are working for an inclusive, democratic future. These requests are reasonable and consistent with Catholic social teaching on human rights and religious freedom.

Given the rising violence, the possible use of chemical weapons, and growing instability, not only within Syria but in surrounding countries, Syria urgently needs a political solution that ends the fighting and creates a future for all Syrians. Pope Francis has called for an end to bloodshed in Syria and for the release of the two archbishops. He has urged support for “humanitarian assistance” and “a political solution to the crisis ... as soon as possible.” We ask the United States to work with other governments to contain the violence, restore stability in the region,

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provide humanitarian assistance, and encourage the building of an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians.

Sincerely yours,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace